

THE STORY OF JOHN CAMPBELL

By Steve Yourglivch



**JOHN
CAMPBELL**



"The great power of the blues is that the blues will address any issue no matter how tough it may be. That's the thing about the blues, it's a victory"

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I first encountered John Campbell whilst browsing through the blues section of my local Andy's Records. Suddenly that face, the intensity, was staring back at me. It was the cover of *One Believer*, and I knew I had to hear this. Thank goodness I did.

This was 1992, little did I know then that a year later John would have released "*Howlin' Mercy*", his masterpiece, only to sadly pass away on the verge of international recognition whilst preparing a third album in as many years. The music John Campbell produced is among the darkest, deepest and most intense blues ever recorded, yet at the same time exciting, raw and uplifting.

John Campbell was born in Shreveport, Louisiana on Jan 20th 1952. He was given his first guitar at the age of five and was hungry to learn as much as possible. His family moved around a lot in his early years and John was always seeking out musicians to learn from. By 13 he was playing professionally, opening for top acts like Clarence 'Gatemouth' Brown, Son Seals and Albert Collins.

In late 1968 a traumatic event occurred. John was the passenger in a horrendous car accident. It is a miracle that he survived at all. John suffered several broken ribs, a collapsed lung and lost an eye. He required over 5000 stitches to reconstruct his face. He was still only 16. In the many long months of recuperation John found strength in listening to the blues he loved and pushing himself through the pain barrier to practice what he was hearing. John later referred to this time, 'You have to be prepared to go the point of death. When I started playing the blues I was literally at the point of death, and it was physically very hard for me.

When I reached for a note and to do a thing, physically it hurts but you gotta push through that'.

Still only in his teens, and with his families support John left home to live as a travelling bluesman, to immerse himself in the hardships and traditions his heroes had endured. He moved to and from New Orleans, Corpus Christi, and many parts of Texas. For a time John formed a 3piece band called Junction, and later another band that included his brother Bill. At other times he travelled and played solo. He played wherever he could, petrol stations, pool halls, street corners, all manner of small venues and clubs. Always studying and always was absorbing the blues.

During this period a recording was made of John playing many of his favourite old blues tunes solo and acoustic. This was eventually released posthumously as *Tyler Sessions* in 2000. Only 1000 copies were pressed. They sometimes crop up on eBay but expect to pay in excess of \$100.

At some point in the early 80's John acquired a guitar of legendary blues status. It was the 1934 built National Duolian beloved and played by Lightnin' Hopkins. Hopkins had requested that it was played at his funeral, Rocky Hill, brother of ZZ Tops Dusty and himself a bona-fide Texas legend, obliged, performing *Amazing Grace*.

In 1986 John moved to New York and this began a period where his career started to move upwards, albeit with some setbacks and disappointments. As before, John initially performed solo with his semi-acoustic, sometimes supporting top names, at other times in clubs, cafes and bars. His reputation was growing and causing quite a stir within the music community. He became friends with top guitarist Ronnie Earl who arranged for a recording of John's delta roots blues accompanied by Ronnie, Jerry Portnoy (Muddy Waters Band), Per Hanson and Darrell Neulisch. All well respected bluesmen who helped out for little reward in the hope of helping John along. With little promotion the album, "*A Man And His Blues*" still received a W.C. Handy nomination and lead to John playing at the New Orleans Jazz Festival, exposing him to bigger audiences. His club dates were becoming the stuff of legend and attracting larger crowds all the time. Eric Clapton, Rick Danko, Mick Taylor, Keith Richards and John Hammond were regular attendees, Taylor and Richards especially were admirers. It was around this time that B.B.Becker, Dr. John's road manager became involved helping to organize things and make introductions.

By the early 1990's John was performing at large blues festivals all across the U.S. and had begun touring Europe. He soon came to the attention of top record labels and eventually agreed to sign for Elektra. They saw John as a natural successor to Stevie Ray Vaughan who had re-ignited sales of rock tinged blues music internationally.

Things in New York were not always easy however. It took a while to get his own apartment, often sleeping on friends or fans couches. There were times when he needed to sell blood to pay for guitar strings. To try and make ends meet John sometimes helped out at the famous Matt Umanov guitar shop. Unsuspecting customers were occasionally treated to impromptu guitar master classes. There was a dark period after the Abilene closed suddenly bringing an abrupt end to John's residency there. He stopped playing for a time and even ended up sometimes sleeping rough on the New York streets. He never forgot those times and later was a driving force behind and performer on a charity fund raiser CD, "*Strike A Deep Chord*", and would play tours of soup kitchens and town squares where the homeless gathered.

John had always taken an interest in magic, especially Native American and Voodoo cultures. After signing with Elektra this part of John's persona began to show itself more. Many who know him well were always aware of this part of John